

## On leaving criminal organizations

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## **On leaving criminal organizations**

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**Abstract** Terrorist organizations, groups, cells or just ‘bunches of guys’ are systematically compared with other types of criminal or deviant organizations: organized crime such as the mafia, street gangs and religious sects. Of course there are many differences between them, especially where motivation is concerned, but they share the common factor that it is almost impossible or very difficult for individual members to step out. However, de-radicalization may follow analogous paths: aging out, accepting exit programs in prison or disengaging ideologically. The article discusses the obstacles that a government strategy that encourages desistance from terrorism by stepping out may encounter. It may be sufficient and more realistic to discourage radicals from using violence than to try to de-radicalize them by using counternarrative techniques.

**Keywords** terrorism, desistance, organized crime, street gangs, sects.

How does deradicalization occur? Based on desistance theory, a great deal of thought has recently been devoted to this issue [5, 13, 18, 19, 21, 35, 36, 39]. One dimension of the problem is how to get members to leave their radical groups. What kind of programs could serve a useful role in this connection? In this article, I explore whether the experiences in encouraging members to leave other types of criminal organizations – organized crime, sects and youth gangs – might be helpful. To what extent is there a similarity to leaving terrorist organizations, especially the home-grown variety?

The four types of organizations differ as regards their ideological motivation, criminal level and openness to new members. But they are relatively similar as regards how difficult it is to leave. I begin by defining the four types of criminal organizations and addressing their similarities. I then introduce several basic concepts of leaving and address the issue of how members who have had enough of their organization can leave and what it costs them to do so. I focus on how the authorities could help them leave. Lastly, I draw my conclusions on stepping out of radical organizations.

## 1. Four types of criminal organizations

*Terrorism* refers to the use of violence towards arbitrary civilians with the intention of scaring people and exerting pressure to achieve a political or ideological aim. Terrorism's archetypical organizational form is the cell. The cell is chosen in such a way that no member is in contact with more than one of two other individuals. This fosters the secrecy that so effectively helps prevent detection. Nowadays it is not uncommon, at least in Western countries, for networks or 'bunches of guys' [55, p. 66] who share the same ideas to be apprehended in some stage of preparing or executing attacks. This is true in the case of home-grown Muslim radicalism in Europe, for example the Hofstad Network in the Netherlands (2003-2006), the Crevice group in England (rounded up in 2004), and the Sauerland group in Germany (apprehended in 2007). These groups can be said to be part of a larger political social movement such as al-Qaeda, and are accepted as such by the base. There are also instances of terrorism by the extreme right wing, the extreme left wing (anti-globalists, anarchists) and animal activists. Their activities, including the preparatory and supportive acts, have been made punishable by law.

*Organized crime* pertains to groups that work together to systematically engage in serious economic offences for the pursuit of monetary gain, specifically extortion and the trade in illegal goods and services. Groups like this shield themselves from the authorities via concealment, intimidation, blackmail and corruption. The archetypical organization exhibits the hierarchical pyramid of the Mafia, as in the movie *The Godfather*. In essence a structure of this kind is not that common in international organized crime, except in southern Italy, China (*Triads*) and Japan (*Yakuza*). Paoli [47] cautions against taking the Mafia as a worldwide example when analysing organized crime. Researchers more frequently come across transnational network structures [45]. Organized crime is punishable by law and in itself, just belonging to these organizations is also punishable.

*Youth gangs* were described for the first time in the United States as groups of youths with a subculture glorifying violence [62]. They are active in their own circumscribed territories and in constant aggressive opposition with similar groups in adjacent neighborhoods. Each group has its own name, style of clothing, language usage and preference for a certain type of music. According to some researchers such as Sánchez Jankowski [57], they constitute tightly-knit and rationally managed organizations, but there is no consensus in the literature on this point [20]. Their style has exerted ample influence on popular youth culture (*West Side Story*, rap music). To the extent that they use violence or commit other criminal acts, these groups are punishable by law.

Initially the term *sect* was simply used for a splinter group that branches off from a larger church, usually taking some followers with it when it secedes. Sometimes sects remain small, but they can also bear the seeds for a new religious movement. Ever since the 1960s, the term has been used pejoratively for movements that cultivate fanatic convictions in the sheltered environments of their own closed groups and are led by charismatic leaders. They sometimes practise rather unusual customs such as polygamy and communal living [44]. The American term *cult* expresses this even more. This new definition of the term sect was coined by oppositional action groups, often composed of parents whose children have disappeared into the Hare Krishna movement, the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon or L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology. Due to the assumption that some members join involuntarily, for example as a result of brainwashing, the groups have a questionable reputation. Some of them are also associated with violence and other forms of crime. The Australian film *Holy Smoke!* is associated with sects. In this cult film made in 1999, Harvey Keitel plays a man hired to deprogram a young woman who joined the sect during a trip to India who ends up a member of the sect himself.

## Differences

The four types of organizations exhibit differences as well as similarities. First the differences. Their members engage in deviant activities of multifarious kinds and have different cultural and ideological backgrounds. A number of activities are punishable by law, and obviously this mainly applies to acts of terrorism and organized crime and less to sects. All four are organizations based on durable collaboration, but of course a sect is much more open to new members than the secret society of the Mafia. The members' social backgrounds differ. In organized crime and youth gangs, most members are from the lower socio-economic classes, but terrorist organizations and sects also include people from the middle classes and intellectual elite. In all four cases, most members are male, although there are quite a few female terrorists and even some youth gangs consisting entirely of girls. Sects also include large numbers of women. In the world of organized crime, it is viewed as a risk to include women, but even in Italy there are a few women who for example run their husband's business while he is in prison [27].

### *Mixtures*

To a certain extent, the four groups overlap in the case of terrorism, and there are exchanges among them that can change their very nature. Terrorism can turn into organized crime, as in the case of remnants of the IRA, narco-terrorism in Lebanon or the FARC in Colombia. In addition, organized crime can adopt terrorist methods, as the Sicilian Mafia clan from Corleone did when targeting art museums [28, p. 193-256] or the Colombian Medellín drug cartel when waging war against the state in 1979-1983 [22]. In prison Gregory Scarpa Jr. of the notorious gangster family made friends with the infamous terrorist Ramzi Yousef, responsible for the first attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 1993 [33].

Sometimes members of terrorist organizations have committed criminal offences in the past. Of the 125 home-grown terrorists whose plans were foiled in the United States since 2001, Jenkins [40] counts twenty-three with criminal records. According to Roy [53, p. 17], juvenile delinquents and former drug addicts sometimes convert to a radical form of Islam to get away from their problems. Mohammed B., who murdered Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in 2004, was a relatively well-integrated Moroccan Dutchman, but even as a minor, he too already had a criminal record [25]. There is also such a thing as personnel exchanges with youth gangs as the target group. Former British Muslim activist Husain [38, p. 33] tells how as a teen-ager in London, he felt attracted to the formidable fighters who called themselves *the practising Muslims* in the 1980s. 'They were as bad and cool as the other street gangs, just without the drugs, drinking and womanizing.' That there are exchanges among the four types of organizations might have to do with the type of personality that is attracted to totalitarian organizations or the personality development they experience within the organizations.

### *Similarities*

Now the similarities. Firstly, the combination of organization and criminality is not an everyday one. Burglars, drug-addicted multiple offenders and prostitutes (prohibited in many countries) might be part of a deviant subculture, but without the elements of an organization. There are also legal organizations whose members do commit criminal acts, i.e. state crime or corporate crime, but there is no evidence of an exclusive criminal subculture.

The combination of criminality and an organized structure is evident though in the four movements I am addressing here. Famous Mafia bosses, prominent leaders of sects or youth gangs and notorious terrorists are generally depicted in popular literature and in their own life histories as authoritarian leaders of strictly and hierarchically structured organizations. In reality, these groups and movements are strikingly flat and without prominent leadership. They are held together by a shared worldview, ideology and ethos. Their worldview is dichotomous. The members are part of *La mala vita* (Mafia) in a world that in their eyes, for the rest, consists of fools. Islamic-driven terrorists feel their religious community is threatened from all sides by a hostile majority of non-believers. Using a term coined by Coser [16], one might call all these organizations *greedy institutions*. When they join, members have to break all the ties with their families and friends and leave the conventional world behind. From that moment on, they lead a socially isolated life and have to adhere to a fixed set of rules.

A second similarity is the age when members join. On the average, the boys and in a few cases the girls as well who join American youth gangs are seventeen. Young men are around twenty when they become *mafiosi*. There are also men who are not incorporated into the world of organized crime until they are older. Kleemans and De Poot [42] refer to them as *late starters*. Jihad terrorists can be of any age, but here again the majority of those who are arrested are teen-agers to about twenty-five [34, 9].

By far most of the recruits are in the youthful stage of life when they are looking for adventure and romance and experimenting with alternative lifestyles. In the 1980s and 1990s, students or would-be students from the Middle East and North Africa went to exciting metropolises in Europe and the United States, and youngsters from the wealthy West went to exotic spots in the Third World. Aspiring terrorists went to training camps in the Arab world or East Africa and the American-based Soldiers of Allah learned to sing Jihad rap.

Youngsters from the West went to join ashrams in India and developed their own youth cultures with Indian music. The longer these groups continued to exist, the older the average age of the members. Nowadays most sect members were born there and the Mafia mainly recruits its new members from criminal families.

Thirdly, a great deal of fuss is made about the act itself of becoming a member. Once a person has burned all his bridges and taken the final step to a new life, he can't go back. There is an initiation ritual that varies from swearing an oath of loyalty to getting a tattoo that brands him forever as a member. Paoli [48, p. 68-69] notes that the testimonies of men who left the Mafia in the twentieth century about their initiation are virtually the same as the ones Lombroso described more than a century earlier. Critchley [17, p. 63] observes the same formulations among the first mafiosi of New York. Another mode of initiation is by having the new recruit commit a serious crime such as murder. Once he has done that, there is no way back. This kind of loyalty test has been observed in the Mafia as well as in youth gangs in Colombia and urban guerrilla movements [31, p. 17]. To be accepted as full color member of the Hell's Angels, the prospect is asked to steal a car or motorcycle. American street gangs like the Bloods and Crips force novices to walk through the neighborhood of a rival gang dressed in their own gang colors. If they make it out alive, they are accepted [20, p. 173-174]. At sects, the rituals are not as rough. Recruits are generally expected to complete a learning process with some kind of examination at the end. Hudson [37] notes that it can also happen that terrorist groups only admit new members who have demonstrated their courage by taking part in an armed attack without showing any trace of fear. Right-wing extremist groups in northern Europe might only admit prospective members who have been arrested by the police [12, p. 35]. Political extremists attend training sessions where they study the literature (Marighella: *Handbook of Urban Guerrilla Warfare*; Qutb: *Under the Umbrella of the Koran, Mein Kampf* etc.), and are initiated via Web sites that introduce them to cruel acts of violence such as beheadings [32]. Then they go to a terrorist training camp where they are given further ideological and military instruction. The next step is to actively engage in acts of warfare or attacks. It is essential to inform the pupils who their enemies are (capitalist exploiters, godless heathens, national oppressors) and to dehumanize them in such a way that novices are capable of killing arbitrary victims [29].

The fourth and final similarity is what this article is about. Once a person has joined an organization, there is virtually no way out. Anyone who tries to leave is violating the code, causing a breach in the group solidarity. This can lead to the risk of secrets being exposed to the outside world. Deserters who *know too much* can expect repercussions. In sects there is usually an exit option, but since it puts the sect at risk of being menaced by media looking for atrocity stories, leaders do not like to let their members go. Former members can have their own reasons for wanting to discredit the movement. Defectors are despised and referred to as despicable animals like a rat (organized crime) or a mole (terrorism). Several examples have greatly increased the distrust of turncoats. This is why the investigating authorities and intelligence bureaus need to be cautious when using former Mafia members or ex-terrorists. Deals with unreliable criminals can cause a great deal of trouble and turncoats like these can no longer be steered by their runners.

## 2. Ways of leaving

### *Collective termination*

Criminologists are well aware that crime develops in waves in the course of time [10]. This also holds true for terrorism or the *fight for freedom* in the eyes of the perpetrators. In a certain sense, fashions come and go in terrorism [52]. There are various opinions and interpretations as regards the duration of these waves. The average duration of a movement is one year, notes Rapoport [35, p. 20] based on a comparison of the histories of numerous groups. There are however movements that last much longer. The Shining Path in Peru for example has been around since the end of the 1960s, as have the FARC in Colombia, the Basque FTA and the New People's Army in the Philippines. The IRA fought for thirty years before a truce was signed.<sup>1</sup> Other authors are of the opinion that terrorist movements do not last longer than one generation, but the RAF for example has been around for more than two generations. Radical Islam differs from all the former movements in that it operates worldwide. When will it end? In all the movements, Forest [29, p. 205] distinguishes a stage of construction, a stage of terrorist activities and a stage when survival is at stake. A wave like this goes through a *natural history*. But how long do the stages last?

There are simply too many variables at play to be able to predict their duration. It is possible though to conduct retrospective research on how movements like these have come to an end up to now. Cronin [18] presents the following possibilities, as if discussing the six (instead of four) Horsemen of the Apocalypse. 1) A terrorist group can come to an end by *decapitation* if the leader is killed or imprisoned. This mainly happens with movements strongly dependent on one charismatic leader. 2) A movement can end by *negotiation* if the political establishment finds a way to incorporate it into the legal process, as was the case with the IRA. 3) A

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<sup>1</sup> A word of caution is called for as regards the common expansion of the term terrorism. Insurgent movements and urban guerrilla groups are included in these surveys.

group can end as a result of its own *success*, as was true of the Irgun in Israel, the FLN in Algeria and the ANC in South Africa. 4) A group can end due to its own *failure* if internal disputes split it up or it is destabilized by covert informers (*supergrasses*). 5) A group can be eliminated as a result of *repression*, as happens in totalitarian countries. 6) Terrorism can end because of a *reorientation* to other goals, much as organized crime turned to pure profit-making. This can change for the better if the ideologists of the movement change course. In the world of political Islam in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Libya and Sudan, for some time there have been thinkers who openly condemn violence such as the legendary Dr. Fadl [39, p. 6].

When a wave of terrorism is over, defectors come forward with testimonies about the violence they have committed. This is what is happening now in Germany with former members of the second generation of the *Rote Armee Fraktion*. Peter-Jürgen Boock became a well-known public figure after he voluntarily came to the *Bundesanwaltschaft* (attorneys at the highest federal court) to tell the story of his life, with much of the focus on his role as an accomplice in the murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer, president of the Confederation of German Employers' Association.<sup>2</sup> Another well-known former member is Susanne Albrecht, who played a role in the murder of a prominent banker. After twelve years in prison, she is a successful example of re-socialization and now works in the field of education.<sup>3</sup>

### *Individual termination*

How do individual members leave a criminal organization? To answer this question, first we need to examine the concept of *desistance*. Maybe all someone is doing is leaving and desisting from further criminal acts. It is also conceivable that the person in question has deliberately concluded his criminal career, at any rate for the time being. This is referred to as *disengagement*. The person leaves, changes his lifestyle and abandons his criminal identity [43, p. 19]. The departure from terrorism is called *deradicalization* [13]. Ashour [4, p. 599] draws a distinction between behavioural and ideological deradicalization. Behavioural deradicalization means abandoning the use of violence, but without rejecting the ideology of the movement. Ideological deradicalization means either the group changes its worldview or the individual totally abandons his convictions. This means the use of violence to achieve political goals is rejected.

This distinction between desistance and disengagement from crime or between behavioural and ideological deradicalization is of essential importance in addressing terrorism and other forms of crime in an organizational framework. If the authorities are solely interested in promoting desistance, then it does not matter what ideas and values the former criminal has, as long as he stops whatever he is doing. It is wonderful if he also adjusts his convictions accordingly, but it is not a prerequisite for a successful departure from a life of crime. If however the authorities are also interested in ideological deradicalization, then first the government will try to change the way radicals think. In the behavioral models of social psychology, this causal sequence is similarly adhered to. This is not essentially done for theoretical reasons, because simultaneously changing behavior and attitudes probably works best [1]. However, changing attitudes takes time, and it is simpler to immediately punish behavior or make it impossible.

Criminals can abandon the world of crime for any number of reasons. Crime is largely related to age, and most criminals stop once they reach the age of twenty-three, twenty-four or twenty-five. There are biological and social reasons for this. Most young men eventually want to lead a conventional life. Members of youth gangs are no longer credible after this age<sup>4</sup>, and the average length of time youngsters remain in sects is no longer than two years. Other turning points in the life course are also age-related [56]. Young people complete their schooling, move away from home, and find a job and a *girlfriend*. Most criminals who have been in prison are from the lower socio-economic classes and do not have a great deal of social capital. In itself the very fact that they turned to crime means they have only very weak ties to conventional institutions such as a school or job, or a church or social club. In the neighborhoods they come from, there aren't the kind of social networks that can help ex-convicts become upstanding citizens. They lack the social resources to get a job, a diploma and a respectable girlfriend. In their social circles, there is very little faith in the authorities. In the war against crime, social scientists who believe in theories on social capital and social ties are always in favor of eliminating this deficit. According to many academic authors, this also holds true of people who join criminal organizations. Scott Decker and Barrik van Winkle [20, p. 280] hold that building up social capital is the only real solution to the problem of American youth gangs and not penal repression.

But is this assumption correct in all four cases described above? It does not work that way for some terrorists, and for organized crime it doesn't work that way at all. Silke [60, p. 119] notes that a deradicalized group of activists has its own group dynamics, making it difficult for them to leave the framework of close

<sup>2</sup> *Der Spiegel*, 29 October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Berliner Zeitung*, 20 September 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Pyrooz, D. & Decker, S.H. Motives and methods for leaving the gang. Understanding the process of gang desistance. In M. Mohommed (ed.). *On desistance* (forthcoming).

cooperation. It is not poverty that radicals share, it is an ideology. Horgan [35, p. 8] has a similar point of view. He holds that radicals do not differ from anyone else as regards their sociological features except that they have been radicalized in a group. It is only in this group context that the development of their radical ideals can be understood. With organized crime, the problem is not a lack of social capital, the problem is an attachment to the relationships and values of the criminal circles they move in. Portes [50, p. 16-18] speaks of negative social capital. There aren't things you have to learn to be able to escape from the criminal organization, there are just things you need to *unlearn*.

Criminal organizations do not allow their members to leave easily. In principle, there is no way back. Anyone who wants to leave will essentially be kept hostage. The special problem leaving a criminal organization entails is finding an acceptable escape route. To my surprise, the criminological literature barely contains any information on escape routes. Researchers who interview people who have left ask them *why*, but not *how* they did so.

The problem can most easily be described in the case of youth gangs. Many members leave because they *age out*. The members themselves, including the ones who have left, all state emphatically that membership doesn't end till you die. But there are plenty of young men in the hood who have been able to find their way out, though not nearly everyone can cope with the constant threat of murderous violence [20, p. 269]. But how? Jankowski [57, p. 61] cites five ways to leave a gang: you *age out*, *die*, *go to prison*, *get a job* or *join another organization*. Short [58, p. 235] mentions the option of moving to another neighborhood in time so as to get outside the gang's sphere of influence and Virgil [63] describes *beating out* as a farewell ceremony. In addition to gang members who leave suddenly (*knifing off*), Pyrooz, Decker and Webb [51] also describe young men who slowly move away from the gang (*drifting off*).

The same is said of the world of organized crime. Mafia defector Antonino Calderone describes his initiation to Mafia expert Pino Arlacchi as follows: "You come in with blood and you go out with blood!" [3, p. 75]. Amir [2] shows that organized crime does not have a retirement age. Even at a ripe old age, mafiosi still run the risk of being liquidated in the course of some vendetta. Whoever reaches retirement age physically still in one piece and not behind bars can maybe assume the role of a respected elderly peacemaker in the crime family.

Many men who have a little nest egg set aside might yearn for a leisurely life of luxury in their old age, but when the time comes, they change their minds. They can't do without their position of power, the respect in their world and the excitement of the criminal lifestyle. At this stage, the intention to just pull one last big job is classical. What is more, leaving can easily be construed as a sign of weakness and deceit, which might be a reason for someone from the organization to come by and take back what they believe, is rightfully theirs. The asset forfeiture measure that was introduced in various countries to discourage organized crime from confiscating illegally acquired capital, has the perverse effect of making it extra hard to leave. After serving a prison sentence, there is nothing left of all the wealth but the debts owed to fellow mafiosi. This explains in part why some underworld bosses are such persistent repeat offenders.

In the literature I barely came across any mafiosi who left the world of crime. Quite a few impressive Mafia biographies have been written, especially by journalists, but very rarely is any mention made of leaving. Michael Franzese, a member of the American Cosa Nostra Colombo family, defied the family by leaving on the request of his new girlfriend. When his father heard about it, he ordered his son killed and from that moment on, the whole organization hunted him down [30]. This is similar to the story of Sicilian Mafia daughter Rita Atria, who turned against the organization in 1992. When her legal protection ended, she saw no other way out than to kill herself (see the gripping movie *La Siciliana Rebelle*). Then there is the bizarre story of Joe Donato, a member of the Los Angeles Mafia, who was saved by the Catholic church. Jesus unexpectedly appeared in his bedroom on 8 March 1972 and God the Father spoke through his mouth and told him he was born again [23, p. 97]. He paid his debts, thought up excuses to get out of his agreements with the underworld and lay low. Turning to religion is probably not that uncommon an escape route.

Under certain circumstances, leaving sects, terrorist organizations or radicalized groups of youngsters does seem feasible without all too many repercussions. It is only logical to assume that the newer a member is, the easier it is to leave. A novice would have less of a shared history with the others and know fewer of the group's secrets. But what makes people decide to desist? Sometimes a result of *spontaneous insight*, leaving is also often preceded by a period of internal deliberation [26]. People can leave sects and terrorist organizations because they are disappointed in the ideology or conduct of the leaders. In sects, they might see their leader pocketing money or sexually exploiting his position of power. At training camps for terrorists, trainees might observe how the people in charge engage in crime for their own personal profit and at *madrasses* where radical Islam is taught, pupils might be sexually abused [61, p. 95]. Ideological differences of opinion can emerge, and doubts about the proper interpretation of classical texts. Trainees might feel they are being used as mere human material for suicide bombings. There are sometimes disputes. Sometimes prospective terrorists just get frightened at the last moment and back out.

The other side of the coin is that defectors forfeit the security of the group and the psychological strength and support of their leaders. The outside world has become unpredictable and it is clear from the accounts of right-wing extremists that they can be apprehensive about the social stigma or afraid of *Berufsverbote* (an order forbidding them to practise their profession) if they are discovered. The more familiar they are with a group's secrets and the greater the risk that they will share them with the *enemy*, the more reason they have to fear reprisals. They might need to flee to another country and live incognito or go into hiding.

In the study by Demant et al. [21] and the one by Horgan [35] where twenty-nine former terrorists are interviewed, entire lists are given of the reasons why they might want to leave. It is important to note that the process of leaving can take any number of winding paths. Very little academic research has been conducted up to now on leaving terrorist organizations, but in the first instance it would seem extremely difficult to predict which members are going to be most apt to leave. Just as we cannot predict which youngsters in a high risk group are going to become terrorists without a valid psychological profile, we do not know which members are going to leave a movement or sect [35, p. xxiii].

How great is the chance of reprisals in actual reality? If someone leaves organized crime and becomes a police snitch or switches from one youth gang to another, he better watch out. But it can also happen that a leader might banish someone from a terrorist group or sect or ask them to leave without there being any repercussions at all. They can also decide to part ways in total harmony. One important condition is that they don't make a public statement afterwards or become a counter-cult activist. In sects, it sometimes happens that after arriving at an agreement, people slip away unnoticed, for example by sneaking out of a dormitory in the middle of the night [64, p. 57].

Members of terrorist organizations also sometimes leave without any serious repercussions. As a discovery, Jacobson [39, p. 29] cites examples of prospective terrorists who left al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan without the people in charge doing anything to stop them. The trainees were preached to and every effort was made to persuade them to stay, but as soon as it became clear that this was not working, they were allowed to leave because making them stay might have had a demoralizing effect on the others. The extremely right-wing Aryan Brotherhood in the United States does have an official policy of *blood in, blood out*, but steps are rarely if ever taken to carry it out.

### 3. State intervention

What can the state do to stimulate spontaneous departures? I shall discuss below the effect of intervention by the criminal justice system, the expansion of social capital by way of re-integration projects and individual psychological counselling using the ideological counter-story.

#### *The criminal justice system*

The counter-terrorism policy of whatever secret services are involved consists of systematically observing extremist individuals, disturbing their preparations and intercepting their communication. The authorities deport foreigners who preach hatred or recruit youngsters for training camps. This averts the immediate danger, something gradual deradicalization is not much of a help with. Home-grown radicals are arrested and sentenced. A tough approach taken by the police and courts can have a sobering effect on youngsters making preparations for acts of violence. Van Donselaar feels the threat of the criminal justice system definitely does make right-wing radicals calculate the risk of a *spoiled identity* [24, p. 216-217]. Moreover, as long as they are in prison, there is not much damage terrorists can do. But various factors need to be taken into consideration. What is the effect of a prison sentence on political criminals like terrorists? And what effect does the imprisonment of one individual have on the organization as a whole? There is the risk that the authorities are breeding martyrs this way.

Once terrorists are in prison, there is the question of what is going to happen next. After they have served their sentence, extremists can not simply be released back into society. How can terrorists or radicals be reintegrated into the normal world? The comparison with organized crime no longer does us much good. Amir [2, p. 74] never observes the kind of moral considerations or expressions of regret on the part of gangsters that a purposeful desistance route can be founded upon. They are observed though among ex-terrorists. Repeat offending is quite common in organized crime, and rehabilitation is rare. Repeat offending is far less common among terrorists and the road to rehabilitation far easier.

There is a good example of this in the Netherlands. The only truly well thought out terrorist movement in the Netherlands was in the 1970s, when Moluccans took train passengers and schoolchildren hostage and liquidated arbitrary passengers to get the Dutch authorities to recognize their independence movement RMS (Republik Maluku Selatan). There were a total of five actions carried out by thirty young Moluccans, six of whom were shot and killed when the train hijacking at De Punt was terminated. The other twenty-four were tried



and served lengthy prison sentences. When they were in prison, one of them took his own life. What happened to the others, who are now men in their fifties? They appear to have been model prisoners. None of them ever committed a serious repeat offence. Upon my request, the local Moluccan community gave me ample information about them. After their release, twenty of them got married or lived together and sixteen have children. The young hijackers mainly attended four-year vocational or secondary schools or had just graduated. During or after their time in prison, various of them continued their education in the care professions, at the art academy or at colleges or technical schools. Almost all of them worked or still work in a wide range of occupations. Some went into creative fields, there are a few artists and poets and one novelist. Unlike the case with the other criminal organizations that are the topic of this article, the hijackers did have the social capital to find a home, a job and a life partner. They were supported by their large families and belonged to an ethnic group with a clear identity and its own political organization [9].

### *Exit programs*

All across the globe, programs have been designed to deradicalize prisoners during their sentence. Italy led the way in 1982 by expediting the end of the *Brigate Rosse* with a semi-amnesty measure. The imprisoned members of the organization were offered a partial parole or exoneration from aggravating circumstances if they were willing to present themselves as *pentiti*. If they had only been members of a terrorist organization without actively taking part in any attacks, and if they were willing to dissociate themselves from the organization, they would be acquitted from their entire prison sentence. This exit arrangement did not require that they snitch on their comrades. That helped.

Starting in the mid-1990s, there have been exit programs in Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands for right-wing radicals who have not served prison terms yet. It is not enough to get them to refrain from committing acts of terrorism, they have to be totally deradicalized and develop a new identity, the identity of an ex-terrorist. A local policeman approaches the youngster and has a word with him or asks him to come down to the police station for a talk. Does he realize he is throwing away his future? Then there is a talk with the parents and significant others. Converted ex-Nazis who were once figures of authority in these circles are mobilized to play an active role.

Egypt was the first Islamic country to experiment with a dialogue program for imprisoned Muslim extremists. Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia and Yemen followed suit. The Egyptian program focuses on people who change their minds, but all the programs are based on the idea that a shortage of social capital needs to be addressed and convicts need to be given a new way of looking at the future. After convicts sign an *armistice agreement*, they are put under a more lenient detention regime and given an opportunity to study in prison, which has led to quite a few university degrees, and the prospect of an early release. Here again, former activists have been appointed to counsel them. In Saudi Arabia they work with the notion of the respectable girlfriend and offer former terrorists a bride and a starting capital of \$20,000 to start a family. Their relatives are persuaded to help by agencies that offer to pay for their medical insurance. An exit program like this can easily be viewed as bribery. To avoid any misunderstanding, it is not the next of kin of the innocent victims who are compensated, it is the terrorists or their families who receive a bonus.

There is a religious committee in Saudi Arabia that includes psychologists and psychiatrists who provide individual after-care. In all these countries, there are enthusiastic advocates of programs of this kind (see e.g. [14] on Saudi Arabia). They have frequently carried out the programs themselves and evaluated them, which does not make their assessment any more reliable. Of course effect evaluation is only useful if it is conducted by objective outsiders. However, barely any objective evaluations have been conducted. But even at a distance, we have already learned enough to warrant a certain amount of scepticism. At any rate, convicts clearly do not choose freely to take part in these programs. Let me take as an example a deradicalization project in Yemen evaluated by an American [11]. Ever since 2002, Judge Hamud al-Hitar had been using Islam as a peaceful instrument for converting militant convicts. He claimed to use *dialogues on a basis of equality*. Each party tried to persuade the other that they were right. By 2005, no fewer than 364 prisoners were given an early release when they abandoned their radical beliefs as a result. With this excellent outcome, the judge held a successful lecture tour from Cairo to London to propagate his model. But the project was suddenly ended in 2005 when American soldiers in Iraq arrested two terrorists who turned out to have undergone this method. It is unclear whether the dialogues actually had any effect. Upon closer inspection, it turns out there were human rights violations (arbitrary arrests, torture, unlimited detention) to get the prisoners to take part in the dialogues on a basis of equality.

### *Counter-narratives*

The reason why references are made to sects when evaluating exit programs for political radicals is that psychological techniques are sometimes used to detach people from the sects and ease them back into

conventional society. The initiative is taken by distraught parents and friends, and in the case of radical groups it is often the state that intervenes. In the case of sects, this approach was questioned as regards the controversial practices of exit counselling [64] and deprogramming [15], or reverse brain-washing techniques [49]. I would like to address a somewhat comparable approach to the problem of radicalization in the form of presenting counter-narratives [46].

A great deal has been written about deprogramming people who have belonged to a sect, and numerous unacceptable practices have been revealed. Barker [8] relates how one of the techniques of constructive reconstruction consists of kidnapping a person, isolating them in a hotel room, undressing them to evoke shame, not letting them sleep or eat and so forth. In this kind of deprogramming route, the idea is to wait for the right moment, the moment the person is open to it, and then starting the reprogramming. The manipulations are carried out by semi-professionals in the fields of psychology or psychiatry, preachers, friends and relatives, and mainly experts by experience, who have successfully been through the deprogramming themselves. They have been tried in court for kidnapping, unlawful restraint and violence [7, p. 104].

A fundamental problem is that the judge or the state that allows these practices will at some point need to draw a distinction between religions and sects or between conventional and new religions. This always implies a value judgement about the contents of new religions. This can easily lead to believers evoking the theological alternative of *good* Islam to combat *bad* Islam [53]. This method works from the assumption that people could not have been in their right mind when they joined the sect, they must have been brainwashed. No empirical evidence has been found to support this claim. There are people who join sects of their own accord and on the grounds of their own convictions, and there are also people who leave them on their own initiative and without the help of professionals or semi-professionals. It has long been common knowledge among people who combat terrorism that many terrorists are not the least bit crazy or unstable. Their groups operate as *learning organizations* [41]. What remains is that defectors do exhibit a number of clinical symptoms that deserve attention from a public health perspective. Wright [64] sums them up as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, anger, a sense of guilt and so forth. He compares this to the symptoms of people who have just been through a divorce, another instance of saying farewell.

#### 4. Conclusions

My first conclusion is that radical movements witness a certain natural course of events. The state will have to follow it and adapt its policy accordingly. If the state intervenes, for practical reasons it is more logical to try and discourage prospective perpetrators from acts of violence than to try and ideologically deradicalize them.

The second one is that just as youngsters grow out of youth gangs, the process of leaving the world of crime or deradicalizing is largely a spontaneous one. People grow older and wiser and their ties to society are tightened if they opt for a conventional life. Unlike the case with organized crime, for most violent radicals it will not be necessary to set up a complicated exit program.

The third is that state policy can be supported by special exit programs. It is unclear though what results these programs have yielded in various countries. Initiative has been taken that amounts to a barely concealed form of bribery, but respectable reintegration programs have also been put into effect. The extent to which these behavioral interventions actually work is still unknown and requires thorough and independent evaluation.

My fourth and final conclusion is that based on the theory of a connection between negative social capital and membership in criminal organizations, more robust behavioral interventions are called for. This will have to be done in an open fashion and not using a behavioral model developed for deprogramming misguided individuals in sects.

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